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Atari Online News, Etc.
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~ Gmail Bug Deleted Mail ~ People Are Talking! ~ More Secure Wi-Fi?
~ Testing Private E-mail ~ Love Pays for Tweets! ~ Firefox 4 Closer!
~ Xoom To Rival the iPad ~ Asteroids Wall Decals! ~ BlackHole RAT Trojan!

~ Used Software Trading? ~ De-mail Deals with Spam ~ National Unplug Day!

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-* Jobs Breaks from Leave To Unveil New iPad2 *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"

Another week has rolled by, and another week I'd like to forget. I'll just simply chalk it up to Spring Fever and let it go at that.

More interesting news coming out of the Middle East these days, with most of the focus on Libya. One can only guess what will happen there, but whatever it might be, it won't be good news for either side. And here in this country, the citizenry is coming out of its hibernation and starting to "fight back" against a variety of political considerations and decisions. "Enough Is Enough" may become a national war-cry! Time will, as they say, tell.

Until next time...

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - PS3 Shipment Detained Over Dispute!
Plenty of Games Coming This Week!
Geek Power: Asteroids Wall Decals!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Dispute Stalls Dutch PlayStation 3 Shipment

Japanese electronics giant Sony said a shipment of its PlayStation 3 consoles was being held in a Dutch port after a court upheld a patent complaint filed by South Korea's LG Electronics.

The shipment, reported to comprise tens of thousands of consoles, has

been held since February after the Dutch court handed down a temporary injunction against importing the goods, said Sony spokesman Yasuhiro Okada in Tokyo.

"The shipment has been stalled since late last month," Okada said, adding that the move came after LG filed a complaint that Sony violated its Blue-ray technologies with the product.

He said that despite the Netherlands being one of Sony’s major access points to Europe, the court decision had not affected its entire PS3 shipment to the region as there were other entry points.

But the spokesman declined to elaborate further on when the company expects the shipment to be released or how many units would be affected due to the injunction.

Dow Jones Newswires, citing a person familiar with the situation, said the shipment comprised tens of thousands of PS3 consoles and that the court had handed down a 10-day injunction.

LG spokesman Kenneth Hong confirmed LG had filed a patent complaint against Sony with the International Trade Commission in the United States earlier this year, relating to its Blu-ray video technology used in PlayStation 3 machines.

But he said the company could not comment on pending legal matters.

Sony might have to pay LG a royalty for every PlayStation 3 game console it sells around the world should it lose the patent claim, potentially costing Sony millions of dollars, the Financial Times reported.

Both sides are locked in patent disputes on various technologies in Europe and the United States.

Last year, Sony brought a patent infringement claim of its own against LG Electronics to the International Trade Commission in Washington.

It claimed that LG mobile phones violated its intellectual property rights and sought to prevent the handsets from being shipped to the United States.

With prices of assembled goods such as TVs being pushed lower by increasing competition, companies are upping scrutiny of rival products and more aggressively pursuing patent royalties, analysts say.

"Electronics companies are struggling to maintain profits amid rigorous price competition," said Koki Shiraishi, analyst at Daiwa Securities Capital Markets.

He added that the Dutch court’s move was unusual and would impact supply if the injunction was extended.

"What seems more common in the United States or Japan is that administrators do not get so involved in such disputes. To me the decision made by the Dutch court does not seem to be a common practice," he said.

"Usually companies try to keep inventories for about two weeks, so I don’t think the 10-day suspension will really hit the European market. But if the suspension gets extended, it would inevitably have an impact."

Gamewatch: Warhammer 40,000 Dawn of War II Retribution, RIFT

It’s no time for peace, respite, or forgiveness in Relic’s Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II Retribution (PC), a standalone sequel to realtime tactics-focused Dawn of War II and its followup, Chaos Rising. Retribution adds a new race (the Imperial Guard), a campaign that supports all six races in single-player, and - crucially for some of you - swaps Microsoft’s Games For Windows Live for Steam, including full Steam achievement support. ETA: 3/1

If you’d rather sample the latest online roleplaying game, Trion’s RIFT (PC) places you at the epicenter of factional hostilities and efforts to fend of extra-planar invasions. RIFT apparently lets you custom spec your character’s profession, then swap professions (up to four) to optimize PvE and PvP play. Speaking of PvP, RIFT also supports inter-server warfare via "Warfronts," allowing you to battle others in world PvP. ETA: 3/1

The rest due this week, by platform.

PC: Fate of the World, Perfect World International: Genesis, The Flying Dutchman

Xbox 360: Rango, Fight Night Champion, Beyond Good & Evil HD

PlayStation 3: Fight Night Champion, Rango

Wii: Rango, Chuck E. Cheese’s Sports Games, Bit.Trip Flux, Remington Super Slam Hunting Alaska

Nintendo DS: Rango, Puzzle Expedition, Busy Scissors, Mahjon Journey: Quest for Tikal, Minute to Win It, Chronicles of Mystery: The Secret Tree of Life

PSP: Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!
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What Every Geek Needs: ’Asteroids’ Wall Decals

Geeks stereotypically aren’t known for design sense. But Blik Asteroids Wall Stickers not only let you show off your nerdy side; they look cool, too.

Blik Asteroids Wall Stickers, officially licensed by Atari, will fix up any geeks wall and make your home more cozy. They feature various

gameplay graphics including a ship, a bunch of asteroids of different sizes, and numbers to "keep score" on your wall.

These wall stickers are made out of Blik Re-Stick, and as the name implies you can remove them from any wall and restick them wherever your heart desires. So if you happen to move, just peel them off your old wall and bring them to your new humble abode.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Republican Lawmaker Promises New Online Privacy Legislation

A senior Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives will soon introduce legislation designed to give Web users more control of their personal data and to give the U.S. Federal Trade Commission power to enforce voluntary privacy standards developed with Internet companies, he said Friday.

Representative Cliff Stearns, a Florida Republican and senior member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said he plans to introduce online privacy legislation soon. The bill's focus will be on allowing Web users to know what personal information Internet companies are collecting about them and to control how it's used, said Stearns, co-author of past online privacy bills.

The bill would encourage Web-based companies to develop industry standards for privacy but would give the FTC some enforcement power, Stearns said during a speech at a Technology Policy Institute (TPI) forum on privacy.

Finding the right balance between privacy and online commerce is a "tough issue," but consumers are demanding more privacy protections. "We are at a tipping point where we have to come to grips with the information that's being collected," he said.

Still, Stearns suggested that online advertising could be hurt if regulations go too far. Online tracking to deliver behavioral, or targeted, ads is a legitimate practice if companies notify consumers what information is collected and allow them to turn off the collection, he said.

"Online advertising ... supports much of the commercial content, applications and services that are available today," he said. "We do not want to disrupt a well-established and successful business model."

Stearns' approach to online privacy would likely be different from a bill introduced in February by Representative Jackie Speier, a California Democrat. Speier's bill would direct the FTC to create standards for a nationwide do-not-track mechanism that would allow Web users to opt out

of online tracking and the sharing of consumer data among online businesses.

The FTC, in a report released in December, called for the technology industry to create more do-not-track tools.Mozilla, Microsoft and Google all announced do-not-track features for their browsers shortly after the FTC report.

The U.S. Department of Commerce called for a privacy bill of rights for Web users in its own December privacy paper.

But William Kovacic, a Republican commissioner at the FTC, questioned what agencies would enforce new privacy standards and whether lawmakers and privacy advocates would stop pushing for more privacy protections if Internet companies met current demands. "Do you believe the promises of the regulators and others that if you do X, they will be satisfied?" he said at the TPI event. "Or is X a revise-and-resubmit process ... in which you never ultimately satisfy the referees?"

The FTC and Commerce reports, as well as some legislative proposals on online privacy, are "very fuzzy" on details on whether there should be strong regulations or voluntary compliance with industry privacy standards, he added.

Before new privacy regulations are created, lawmakers should look at the potential impact on Internet commerce, added Thomas Lenard, president at TPI, an antiregulation think tank. "More privacy generally means less information available" on the Internet, he said.

But Daniel Weitzner, associate administrator at the Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), disagreed, saying recent studies suggest that Internet-based companies that give users more control over their personal data can build loyalty and advertising click-through rates at the same time. Giving consumers greater control over their privacy doesn’t necessarily mean that online companies will lose access to all that data, he said.

"We really see no evidence that there’s some trade-off" between privacy and e-commerce, Weitzner said.

Schumer Calls For More Secure Wi-Fi Networks, Encryption

New York Sen. Charles Schumer on Monday called on Internet companies like Amazon, Twitter, and Yahoo to encrypt their users’ accounts in order to prevent hackers from gaining access to personal information over Wi-Fi networks.

Specifically, Schumer called on Web companies to switch from the HTTP protocol to the more secure HTTPS option. HTTPS keeps data encrypted as it travels between your Web browser and servers and is mostly used for things like banks and credit card company Web sites.

"The number of people who use Wi-Fi to access the Internet in coffee shops, bookstores and beyond is growing by leaps and bounds, but these users are unaware that they are easy prey for hackers and identity thieves," Schumer, a Democrat, said in a statement. "It is scary how easy it is. Free Wi-Fi networks provide hackers, identity thieves and

spammers alike with a smorgasbord of opportunities to steal private user information like passwords, usernames, and credit card information."

The "quickest and easiest way" to stop this is to switch from HTTP to HTTPS, he said. He pointed to Firesheep, a Firefox add-on that made headlines in October for allowing people to take over sessions on Facebook, Twitter, Google, and more via open Wi-Fi networks.

The growth of free Wi-Fi hotspots provide opportunities for hackers to exploit security flaws in HTTP extensions, Schumer said.

In letters to several tech companies, Schumer wrote that he is "calling on you to make the switch to a default HTTPS protocol for all browsing on and interface with your site. Many other companies have already made this change, and it would be in the public interest for you to do so as well. Your customers - and my constituents - deserve to have their information kept as safely as possible."

Sites that deal with sensitive personal information have typically used HTTPS during the sign-in process to protect password information and reverted back to HTTP afterwards because full encryption can sometimes slow down your experience on that site.

In January, Facebook introduced the option to encrypt your Facebook session at all times, as well as an easier account authentication process. Hotmail has a similar option. Last year, Google announced that it would encrypt Gmail at all times, not just during sign-on, and make the process an opt-out feature rather than opt-in.

Lawsuit Tests Use of Private E-mail for Public Business

A lawsuit filed against the mayor and city council of Austin will test whether public officials in Texas can use their private e-mail accounts to hide communication about government affairs from public scrutiny.

Rulings in similar cases in other states have generally found in favor of public disclosure.

The suit, filed on Tuesday in state District Court in Travis County by the Austin Bulldog, a local news website, alleges that members of the Austin City Council broke open-records laws by failing to release private e-mails, text and instant messages that relate to city business.

The plaintiffs argued that Texas law requires city employees and officials to turn over local government records even when they’re written on personal devices. "We believe that technologies like e-mails, instant messaging have been misused, and record retention laws haven’t been enforced," said Bill Aleshire, an attorney for the plaintiff and a partner at Riggs, Aleshire & Ray in Austin. "City employees and officials have been transacting government in the shadows by using their own personal equipment."

Austin city spokesman Doug Matthews declined to respond to specific allegations in the case, but said that Texas law is unclear on which electronic communications are subject to disclosure laws. He pointed to three related cases currently pending in the state. "We’re not alone in this," said Matthews. "In fact, statewide it remains an open question

because the state law doesn’t address private text and e-mail messages."

The Austin Bulldog filed a public information request in January for copies of all written communication between Austin City Council members and the mayor in 2010. The city delivered some e-mails last week, but the Bulldog said the city did not release all communications, including those relating to city business from council members’ personal phones and e-mail addresses.

The suit said city officials have used private e-mail and phone accounts to "keep substantive communications" away from public view. In one example cited in the suit, a council member asked a constituent to switch to the councillor’s personal e-mail address to continue discussing tax subsidies for a shopping center.

It further alleged that the city’s internal instant-messaging platform is a "secret messaging system established to avoid retention of certain public records." The complaint was based on the Texas Public Information Act and the Local Government Records Act, which prohibits destroying or intentionally withholding communications of public record. Most states have some form of open-record legislation that defines retention requirements and access procedures for public records.

In recent years, courts have ruled in favor of public disclosure, said Benjamin Wright, a Dallas-based attorney who specializes in data security law. He cited a 2007 case in which a Kentucky judge required the state government to turn over copies of e-mails between two state employees, and an Arizona case the same year in which that state’s Supreme Court held that a trial judge must decide whether a county official’s e-mails were private. He also pointed to a 2008 decision by the Ohio Supreme Court that deleted e-mails of county commissioners must be recovered.

Libyan Internet Service Cut Again

Internet service has been completely severed inviolence-torn Libya for the second time in two weeks, US online traffic monitoring firms said Friday.

Arbor Networks said all Internet traffic in and out of Libya "abruptly ceased" between 1630 GMT and 1700 GMT on Thursday.

"This outage follows several weeks of periodic Internet outages and reduced traffic volumes likely related to the ongoing social and political events in the country," it said.

Fierce clashes were reported in Libya on Friday between rebels and forces loyal to Libyan leader Moamer Kadhafi.

Another Web traffic monitoring firm, Renesys, said Internet service from Libya went down shortly after 1635 GMT on Thursday.

"It looks like this is more than a blip - radio silence for 12 hours and counting," Renesys said in a blog post on Friday.

"All of the Libyan-hosted government websites we tested (ie, the ones that are actually hosted in Libya, and not elsewhere) were unreachable," it said.

Google, which tracks the status of products such as Google Search and YouTube in various countries, reported that the services and others were abruptly unavailable in Libya since Thursday.

Internet traffic in and out of Libya was completely severed for the first time on February 18.

Jobs Breaks from Medical Leave To Unveil iPad 2

Apple CEO Steve Jobs briefly emerged from his medical leave and walked on stage to a standing ovation Wednesday to unveil the second generation of the popular iPad. It comes with two cameras and will go on sale March 11 in the U.S.

Jobs looked frail as he appeared in his signature black mock turtleneck, blue jeans and wire-rimmed glasses.

"We've been working on this product for a while, and I just didn't want to miss today," Jobs told an audience that included bloggers and Apple enthusiasts. "Thank you for having me."

The next-generation tablet computer is faster than the original iPad's. As expected, it comes with two cameras for taking photos and video chatting. The battery life will be the same as the original - about 10 hours of usage or a month on standby.

The iPad 2 is also thinner - 8.8 millimeters, or about a third of an inch, instead of the current 13.4 millimeters.

"The new iPad 2 is actually thinner than your iPhone 4," Jobs said.

The original iPad, which went on sale last April, was more popular than analysts anticipated. Apple sold 15 million in nine months.

The iPad was initially used for checking e-mail, surfing the Web and watching online video. But as the number of software applications - or "apps" - designed just for iPad grew, the tablet made itself at home in offices, shops, restaurants and countless other settings.

The rush for iPads sparked dozens of copycat touch-screen devices, but so far, none has broken into the mainstream consciousness the way the iPad has. In February, Motorola Mobility Inc.'s Xoom, the most promising challenger so far, went on sale. It runs a new version of Google Inc.'s Android software that was designed for tablets, not smart phones.

The new iPad will make it even harder for rivals to compete.

"Overall, the big message today is that Apple is offering a version 2 device while everyone else is still attempting to ship their first version 1 devices," said Yankee Group analyst Carl Howe.

He said the iPad 2's improvements are modest over the first one, but it will nonetheless stand out because there are more apps available.

Sarah Rotman Eps, a Forrester Research analyst, said iPads should make up at least 20 million of the 24.1 million tablet computers she expects

people in the U.S. to buy this year.

Tablet computers existed long before the iPad, but it took Apple to build a device that made sense to consumers. Apple simplified the software, packed it in sleek, shiny hardware and sold it to a generation of gadget lovers who, most likely, already have a smart phone and a laptop that serve most of the same functions.

The new iPads will cost the same as the originals - $499 to $829, depending on storage space and whether or not they can connect to the Internet over a cellular network. Apple said there will be black and white versions, despite its problems getting the promised white iPhone 4 models to market. The first iPad came only in black. In the U.S., the iPad 2 will work on AT&T Inc. and Verizon Wireless.

A reporter who used a white iPad 2 immediately after the announcement found it noticeably thinner and more curvy. YouTube video loaded quickly using AT&T’s data service, and "Toy Story 3" played smoothly. Given its size, the iPad 2 appeared impractical for taking lots of photos, but both cameras will help with video chats - the front one to show the caller, and the back one to show what the caller is seeing.

Jobs also introduced a new accessory for the iPad that will let people connect the tablet to high-definition televisions, so they can watch videos up to 1080p in resolution on the bigger screen. The $39 part plugs into the iPad’s charging port and connects to an HDMI cable.

After its March 11 U.S. launch, the iPad 2 goes on sale March 25 in at least 26 other markets, including Mexico, New Zealand, Spain and other European countries.

Apple also introduced updates to the software that runs on the iPad, iPhone and iPod Touch devices. The company said the update would work on GSM-type iPhone 3GS and iPhone 4 models; Verizon Wireless’ version uses a different technology.

The new system, iOS 4.3, includes support for FaceTime, Apple’s video-chat program. The company said people can now hold conversations between iPads, iPhones and Mac computers.

The update turns iPhones and iPads with 3G cellular connections into personal Wi-Fi hotspots, so you can share the connection with computers or other devices - if your wireless carrier allows it. Many charge additional fees for this service.

The improved software also makes Apple’s Safari Web browser run faster.

Apple also announced new software designed for the iPad, including a $4.99 version of iMovie for video editing and a $4.99 version of GarageBand, its music recording and editing software. GarageBand includes instruments that can be played by touching the iPad 2’s screen, and it can even sense whether you’re tapping quietly or banging on the "keys." People can start a project on their Mac, then work on it later on the iPad 2.

Jobs gave an update on the company’s iBook business, saying people downloaded more than 100 million books since the e-book business launched last year. He also said Random House became the last major publisher to agree to sell its titles in the iBookstore.

Jobs announced in January that he would take a third leave of absence to focus on his health. In the last decade, Jobs, 56, has survived a rare but curable form of pancreatic cancer and undergone a liver transplant.

Chief Operating Officer Tim Cook has been running day-to-day operations.

In 2009, Jobs said in advance that he would take a six-month medical leave; this time, the company did not specify when he would return. The last time Jobs went on medical leave, marketing chief Phil Schiller was the main presenter at product launch events.

Xoom Emerges As First Real iPad Competitor

Motorola’s Xoom has been hailed as the most likely tablet computer to rival Apple’s iPad - the first with the goods to compete against the uncontested leader in this nascent but rapidly growing market.

After trying it out, I found it to be a great gadget that, in many ways, can keep up with the black slab from Apple. The first black slab, that is. Unfortunately, Apple said Wednesday that it will start selling a new, improved iPad next week, which will likely make it difficult for the Xoom to snag many users.

The Xoom is well-equipped, with a large, vivid touch screen and zippy processor.

It’s the first to use Honeycomb, Google Inc.’s flashy tablet-geared Android 3.0 software, which is a big improvement over older versions designed for phones but pushed onto some tablets.

It’s clear the software was designed for a tablet’s larger touch screen. A persistent bar at the bottom of the screen displays virtual "home" and "back" buttons. You get information such as battery life and wireless reception and notifications for e-mails, instant messages and more. You also get a virtual button that can pull up miniaturized images of your most recently used apps, the way it looked when you last used them. That makes it convenient for speeding back over to a game or Web page.

The touch-screen keyboard is also nicer, thanks to Honeycomb. It’s easier to type e-mails and instant messages on the Xoom than on tablets running older versions of Android. Although it doesn’t seem as easy to use as the iPad’s virtual keyboard, the Xoom’s keyboard is fairly spacious and was something I got use to typing with after several hours. Those who do a lot of typing can use a Bluetooth keyboard or connect a USB keyboard with an adapter through the Xoom’s Micro USB port.

There’s one big blemish marring the Xoom’s otherwise delightful package: its price tag.

The Xoom, made by Motorola Mobility Inc. and available from Verizon Wireless, costs $800 without a cellular-service contract, about $70 more than a similarly apportioned iPad. You can get a Xoom for $600, but you’ll have to sign up for a two-year data plan that runs at least $20 per month; by contrast, AT&T Inc. offers month-to-month data service for the iPad. Like the iPad, the Xoom lets you access the Internet through Wi-Fi, so a data plan isn’t essential.

While Motorola offers the Xoom in only one configuration right now with 32 gigabytes of storage and data access through both Wi-Fi and Verizon's cellular network - Apple offers a range of iPads. The cheapest is $499 and comes with 16 gigabytes of built-in storage and Wi-Fi access. The most expensive is $829 for a 64-gigabyte version with Wi-Fi and the ability to access AT&T's data network for an additional fee.

Apple's iPad 2, which will be available in black and white, will keep the same pricing structure, and a version of it will work with Verizon's network.

Other than price, the Xoom and the iPad appear pretty similar: Both are thin, shiny slabs, though the Xoom's screen is a bit bigger (and the new iPad is noticeably thinner). The Xoom, like the iPad, has very few buttons: Volume buttons sit on one side, and a combined power and lock button is inconveniently positioned on the back.

The Xoom also has some 3-D-esque views incorporated throughout Xoom's software. Play music on the Xoom and you'll notice your albums are viewable in a 3-D-like array, or open up the included YouTube app and you'll see a curved gallery of videos.

I was happy to see an updated Web browser, which gives you the ability to open multiple tabs on a single screen; the iPad can't do that and instead forces you to open a new window for each Web page. Web surfing becomes easier and more clearly organized because you can see what you're doing all on one screen, without having to leave the webpage you're looking at. The browser also lets you surf the Web in "incognito mode," which means pages you visit won't be logged in the tablet's browsing or search history; that's a feature common on desktop browsers.

Sadly, the Xoom didn't come with support for Flash videos, which is a popular online video format. An upgrade to allow that is coming soon.

The Xoom's screen measures 10.1 inches diagonally, compared with the iPad's 9.7 inches. Its resolution is slightly higher than the iPad's, and videos and photos looked bright and sharp with vivid colors. It's great for reading books downloaded through the included Google Books app. The app looks similar to one for Apple Inc.'s iBooks, but it also has "day" and "night" settings. Those let you switch to a white-text-on-black-background view when reading in the dark.

The Xoom includes a 5-megapixel camera on the back and a 2-megapixel camera on the front - cameras were lacking on the first iPad, but the iPad 2 will also have front and rear cameras. The Xoom's back camera includes some simple color effects and scene modes for adjusting your images. The front camera works with Google Talk's video chat feature, so you can conduct video chats with friends. This is a nice addition I'd been waiting to see.

I hoped there would be more tablet-specific apps available through Google's Android Market, but I only counted a handful, including a CNN application and the "Fruit Ninja" game. Several existing apps looked good on the Xoom's larger screen, however, including the game "Angry Birds."

These features are backed up by a dual-core processor, which make the Xoom zip along. The Xoom's 1 gigabyte of random-access memory - the kind important for running programs - is much more than the iPad has. In my tests, the tablet rarely faltered and was quick to load content offline.

Online, it was fairly speedy and reliable, and this is expected to improve. Currently, the Xoom uses Wi-Fi or Verizon’s existing 3G data network for wireless service. Eventually, it will be upgraded to work on Verizon’s faster 4G network.

The battery is rated for up to about 10 hours of video playback, or about nine hours of Web browsing over 3G; I played YouTube videos over Verizon’s network and got more than six hours of life out of the Xoom. Not bad, but it could be better.

Regardless, the Xoom is a strong tablet, and the first true competitor to the iPad thus far. The new iPad looks enticing, but if you’re set on getting a non-Apple tablet and can get past the Xoom’s steep price, it’s a good pick.

As Firefox 4 Beta 12 Debuts, Mozilla Looks Ahead to Firefox 5

Mozilla on Friday rolled out what appears to be the last beta release of its Firefox 4 open source Web browser software.

Available for Linux, Mac and Windows, Firefox 4 beta 12 offers numerous improvements to the browser’s general stability, performance and compatibility, Mozilla says. Performance is now better while viewing Flash content, for example, as is plugin compatibility when hardware acceleration is enabled.

Several hundred bugs have also been fixed in this latest release, for a total of more than 7000 fixed since the software’s first beta version. On the usability end, hovering over a link now displays the URL at the bottom of the window rather than in the location bar.

"We are in the final stages of the Firefox 4 Beta cycle," reads the announcement on the Mozilla Blog.

A release date for the final version has not yet been announced, but a release candidate is due sometime in March, according to the software’s accelerate the software’s development cycle, rolling out multiple major releases this year, all the way through version 7.

In the meantime, the new beta version is now available for download on Mozilla’s site. More than 400 million people now use Firefox around the world, the company says.

Firefox 4 has experienced numerous delays in its development cycle, and there have been more beta versions than originally expected. Among the more notable features of the new version are support for "do not track" capabilities along withJˆegerMonkey, a considerably faster JavaScript engine.

With a new homepage design, Firefox 4 offers a new "tabs on top" layout, and it no longer switches into offline mode automatically. Tabs and add-ons can be managed more easily, Mozilla says, and new synchronization features help keep versions across devices fully up to date.

Multitouch, 3D graphics and the WebM format are all supported, as is hardware acceleration, though problems with drivers have made that feature

problematic on Linux.

Even as Mozilla is wrapping up work on Firefox 4, development is already under way on Firefox 5, the software's next major version.

Indeed, Conceivably Tech recently uncovered notes and a series of mockups suggesting that the next version will feature a more responsive interface, an updated search bar that's 240 pixels wide, and substantial changes to the appearance and use of tabs.

Particularly intriguing, in fact, are suggestions that Mozilla may be planning a "site-specific browser" in which tabs get dedicated to specific sites and which will integrate a navigation menu and site links within a site tab. A visit to Twitter, for example, might then automatically integrate "new tweet," "direct messages" and "mentions" within a drop-down menu on the tab for that site.

Other ideas being considered include new ways of promoting Firefox Sync and blocking automatically installed add-ons.

Currently occupying the No. 2 spot in the worldwide browser market - behind only Microsoft's Internet Explorer - Firefox was recently named the No. 1 browser in Europe. Time will tell whether these exciting new changes will be enough to propel the browser ahead of its competition. In the meantime, Firefox remains my browser of choice.

Gmail Bug Deletes E-Mails for 150,000 Users

The cloud has failed roughly 150,000 Gmail users, whose e-mails have been deleted and accounts disabled by a mysterious glitch.

Users on Google's help forum report that the Gmail bug responsible deletes everything, including e-mails, labels, folders, and settings. When affected users log on, they see a welcome message as if they've never used Gmail before. Other users simply found their accounts disabled while repairs are being done. According to Mashable, the bug affects less than 0.08 percent of users.

It's not yet clear whether Google will be able to restore the deleted e-mails. Google hasn't addressed the issue on the official Gmail blog, and the Google Apps Status Dashboard only acknowledges an ongoing "service disruption." Eventually, Google will have to explain how this happened and what will become of affected users' accounts.

For everyone else, the lost e-mails are a reminder of how Web storage isn't completely immune to failure. If you rely on Gmail to safeguard e-mailed documents and important correspondences, consider backing up your account.

PCWorld's Ian Harac reviewed Gmail Backup in December and found it to be a functional, but feature-barren option. The software is free, but right now I can't access Gmail Backup's Website. (Perhaps it's overwhelmed by demand.) Ian also recommended Gmail Keeper, which offers multiple profiles, scheduled backups, and account migration for a one-time price of $30.

If you're comfortable backing up Web-based e-mail to another Web-based service, Backupify routinely saves Gmail accounts and other services such

as Facebook and Picasa to its own servers. The first 2 GB are free, and premium plans costs $5 per month for 20 GB and $20 per month for unlimited storage.

The lost e-mails are reminiscent of a Hotmail server problem that temporarily deleted the e-mails of more than 17,000 users in December. Microsoft was able to restore access a few days later, so maybe there's hope for those unlucky Gmail users.

European Court to Rule on Legality of Used Software Trading

The European Court of Justice (ECJ) has been asked to decide whether the trading of "used" software licenses is legal.

The German Federal Court of Justice referred the question to the ECJ following a legal battle between Oracle and usedSoft, a company that buys and sells used software. Oracle launched the case after usedSoft offered "pre-used" Oracle software licenses online in October 2005.

Oracle says that its license agreements with its customers contain provisions to the effect that the software can't be used by a third party.

However usedSoft argues that it acquired a notarized statement from the original licensee that he was the lawful holder of the licenses, that he no longer used the licensed programs and that he had paid the purchase price in full. usedSoft's customers who acquired a "used" license downloaded the software from Oracle's website.

The German Regional Court originally ruled in favor of Oracle, but following usedSoft's appeal, the federal court decided to refer the matter to the ECJ. The European court will consider how directive 2009/24/EC on the legal protection of computer programs should be applied in this case. This will also set a precedent for trading of used software licenses throughout the European Union.

The ruling should also clarify the legal status of individuals who have purchased used licenses.

usedSoft welcomed the decision to involve the European Court of Justice.

"Ultimately, the resale of downloaded software is based on European regulations which must also be clarified for all of Europe," said usedSoft managing director Peter Schneider. "We regard this to be an important stepping stone victory on the way to truly free trade on the software market."

The ECJ may take up to two years to rule on the case. Oracle said it would not comment on the case.

Germany Identifies a Secure Way to Deal With Spam

In theory, stopping spam is easy: just make it uneconomic to send millions of messages by charging for each one sent, or make senders authenticate their identity to stop address spoofing and simplify

blocking.

In practice, that would involve building a secure, parallel e-mail infrastructure linking electronic authentication with real-world identities: a daunting task. Yet that’s just what Germany is about to do.

De-mail - a play on the country-code abbreviation for Deutschland (Germany) and the word e-mail - is a government-backed service in which all messages will be encrypted and digitally signed so they cannot be intercepted or modified in transit. Businesses and individuals wanting to send or receive De-mail messages will have to prove their real-world identity and associate that with a new De-mail address from a government-approved service provider. The service will be enabled by a new law that the government expects will be in force by the end of this month. It will allow service providers to charge for sending messages if they wish.

Eliminating spam is not the primary purpose of De-mail - in fact, service providers will be legally obliged to deliver every De-mail message, without blocking any, just as the postal service is not supposed to throw away your mail.

But the proportion of spam in De-mail is likely to be much lower than in regular Internet e-mail, of which 77.6 percent was spam in January, according to Kaspersky Labs. That’s because De-mail’s requirement that senders identify themselves will make it riskier to promote fake pharmaceuticals and illegal pyramid investment schemes, while any charges to send messages will make spamming less profitable.

The identity requirement will also make it easy for recipients to filter and block unwanted De-mail messages - there is no legal obligation to read them, after all. Filtering is also possible with regular Internet e-mail, but less reliable because of the possibility of address spoofing.

Messages sent through the De-mail service will have the same legal protection and status as paper mail, making it possible to send the equivalent of recorded delivery mail and obtain a legally valid receipt.

On the technical side, De-mail will use existing Internet standards, carrying messages over encrypted connections between dedicated SMTP (Simple Mail Transfer Protocol) servers that only communicate among themselves, isolated from regular Internet mail servers. The law will require De-mail service providers to comply with strict technical specifications and to pass regular security audits.

Telecommunications operator Deutsche Telekom, corporate e-mail provider Mentana Claimsoft and Internet service provider United Internet (owner of the brands GMX and 1&1) are promoting the future service at the Cebit trade show in Hanover, Germany, this week, as is the German Ministry of the Interior, backer of the scheme.

Deutsche Post, the German postal service, has also developed a De-mail service, according to Ministry sources, but Deutsche Post was showing only its ePostBrief secure webmail service, which is already on the market but is not interoperable with De-mail.

None of the De-mail providers exhibiting at Cebit would say exactly how much they planned to charge for the service, although none of them expect the cost to exceed that of a paper letter, currently €0.55 (US$0.75) in Germany. But even at that price, De-mail senders would save

by eliminating the cost of paper and printing -- or at least passing it on to recipients wishing to keep a physical copy of a document.

The secure nature of De-mail will allow banks and utilities to push out monthly statements or bills electronically, rather than on paper.

Customers can obtain the same documents from the websites of those organizations today, "but it's a pull process, they have to log in and download all this information," said Jens Mayer, De-mail project leader at Deutsche Telekom.

With De-mail, they'll be able to log in to a single site or service, the same one they use every day, to access bills and statements.

Deutsche Telekom's plan is that De-mail will be just another tab in the webmail interface for customers of its ISP subsidiary, T-Online: "Our philosophy is that De-mail should be as easy as e-mail," Mayer said.

Mentana Claimsoft, meanwhile, wants businesses and government organizations to use their existing Outlook clients and Exchange servers. The company has developed an Outlook plugin to flag authenticated incoming messages with a De-mail icon. Outgoing De-mail messages can go through Exchange too: Mentana Claimsoft will operate secure gateways into the De-mail system, although its customers will remain responsible for the authentication of their users and the security of their internal networks, said Nils Kiehne, an account manager and consultant with Mentana Claimsoft's GovMail division.

For now, De-mail usage will be restricted to German residents and businesses, but other countries could get involved. European Union competition laws require that Germany allow service providers from elsewhere in the E.U. to offer De-mail. And the legal frameworks for similar services elsewhere are starting to appear: only last month, France passed a law defining the technical framework for electronic registered mail.

Hacker Writes Easy-To-Use Mac Trojan

In a sign that hackers, like everyone else, are taking an interest in everything Apple, researchers at Sophos say they've spotted a new Trojan horse program written for the Mac.

It's called the BlackHole RAT (the RAT part is for "remote access Trojan") and it's pretty easy to find online in hacking forums, according to Chet Wisniewski a researcher with antivirus vendor Sophos. There's even a YouTube video demonstration of the program that shows you what it can do.

Sophos hasn't seen the Trojan used in any online attacks - it's more a bare-bones, proof-of-concept beta program right now - but the software is pretty easy to use, and if a criminal could find a way to get a Mac user to install it, or write attack code that would silently install it on the Mac, it would give him remote control of the hacked machine.

BlackHole is a variant of a Windows Trojan called darkComet, but it appears to have been written by a different developer. The darkComet source code is freely available, so it looks like BlackHole's author simply took that code and tweaked it so it would run on the Mac,

Wisniewski said.

Mac OS X has been gaining market share on Windows lately, and that's starting to make it a more interesting platform for criminals. Wisniewski said that while Mac malware is still very rare, he has seen another Trojan, called HellRTS, circulating on file-sharing sites for pirated Mac software.

$430K Love Settlement Shows Tweets Can Be Costly

Courtney Love's settlement of a case sparked by online attacks on a fashion designer show that while Twitter posts may be short, they can also be costly.

The singer has agreed to pay Dawn Simorangkir $430,000, plus interest, to settle a lawsuit the designer filed in March 2009 over comments Love made on Twitter and her MySpace blog.

While the case didn't go to a jury, First Amendment experts say it highlights the need for celebrities and average people to watch what they say online.

"People are getting in trouble for Twitter postings on an almost daily basis," said First Amendment Attorney Doug Mirell, a partner at Loeb and Loeb who did not handle the case.

"The laws controlling what is and isn't libelous are the same regardless of the medium in which the statements appear," he said.

Simorangkir's attorney, Bryan J. Freedman, agreed, and said Love's settlement should drive that point home.

"The fact is that this case shows that the forum upon which you communicate makes no difference in terms of potential legal exposure," Freedman said. "Disparaging someone on Twitter does not excuse one from liability."

Love's attorney, Jim Janowitz, said the settlement actually saved the rocker money. "This is a case where the economics of the case didn't make a lot of sense for either side," he said, noting that the costs of going to trial would have been large.

Janowitz said he would have argued that Love's statements were opinion and hyperbole, but not libelous, and that Simorangkir's sales rose after Love's tirades.

Twitter's popularity has skyrocketed in the past year, in part because celebrities interact with fans on a daily basis by posting candid photos, thoughts and even product endorsements.

The widow of grunge rocker Kurt Cobain, Love has gained a reputation on the microblogging service Twitter with her posts, which are occasionally profane and sometimes nonsensical messages on a variety of topics. Several posts have lashed out at attorneys and other individuals who have drawn the musician's ire, with her tweets coming in rapid succession and using every bit of the site's 140 character maximum per post.

Simorangkir sued over several postings written under Love’s former Twitter account, courtneylover79, that accused the designer, who is known as Boudoir Queen, of theft and of having a criminal background.

Simorangkir’s lawsuit claimed Love became angry with her after she completed five outfits for the singer and sent her a bill.

"Love mounted a malicious campaign to not only terrorize Simorangkir, but to ruin and destroy her reputation and livelihood," Freedman wrote in a May 2009 filing.

The case had been scheduled to go to trial in February, and was expected to be the first in which a jury decides whether a celebrity’s Twitter posts could be considered libel.

Freedman confirmed that a settlement had been reached, and said Love’s attorneys had hoped to keep it confidential. Love also settled another lawsuit filed by Simorangkir’s husband over photos for a nominal amount, Janowitz said.

"In order to show the world the comments were derogatory and completely illegal, it was imperative to my client to have the settlement be public," Freedman said.

The attorney said a public statement will be issued next week, but the monetary settlement that Love is required to pay, reflects the seriousness of the case.

"Personally, I think $430,000 is an appropriate way to say she’s sorry," Freedman said.

Mirell said stars need to be cautious about how and what they post online, especially when they’re talking about others.

"When you start talking about someone other than yourself, you are beginning to get into dangerous territory," Mirell said.

Janowitz predicted other celebrities are likely to get into trouble over their social media musings.

"Undoubtedly there will be people who do it until it is better understood that this publication, just like anything else, is publication," he said.

Man Gets 7 Years for Forcing Modems to Call Premium Numbers

A New Hampshire man who made US$8 million by installing unwanted dial-up software on computers and then forcing them to call expensive premium telephone numbers was handed down an 82-month sentence on Monday.

Prosecutors say that between 2003 and 2007, Asu Pala and others put together a lucrative business by setting up premium telephone numbers in Germany - similar to the 1-900 numbers used in the U.S. - and then infecting German PCs with software that would automatically dial the numbers for short periods of time.

"The victims were generally unaware that their computers' telephone modems were calling these numbers and charging them with expenses," the U.S. Department of Justice said in a press release.

These dialers were a major, but largely unreported, problem in Europe in the early part of the last decade. In 2006, two men were given stiff sentences by an Austrian court for running a scam that brought in L12 million ($16.5 million). And while dial-up modem usage has dwindled, shrinking the number of possible victims, this type of software is still in circulation in Europe.

Pala, a Turkish immigrant to the U.S., ran a small Massachusetts Internet service provider called Sakhmet when he was approached by others - men he believed to be the brains of the operation - and enticed into building the back-end infrastructure for dialer software that was then downloaded onto the German computers, his lawyer, Geoffrey Nathan, said in an interview Tuesday.

The money was good. Pala was caught after he was flagged by federal authorities after paying cash for his second Lamborghini sports car, Nathan said. By May 2009, Pala had begun cooperating with federal authorities and was training U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation agents across the country on how the Trojan downloader scam worked. He was also secretly working on a sting, trying to nail the two men who had introduced him to the scam. But they couldn't be enticed into a meeting, and the feds ultimately pulled the plug on the operation.

At his sentencing, Pala was given a break for his cooperation with the government, but had the sting worked, it would have cut years more off his sentence, Nathan said. "The case reflects the pitfalls and the success of a cooperation agreement," he said.

The people Pala had been trying to turn in, however, are still running the scam, Nathan said. "Most regrettably, it turns out that the big fish got away with the crime and they remain in operation."

Pala pleaded guilty to fraud and tax evasion charges in U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts in April 2010. In addition to the 82-month sentence, he must pay a $7.9 million fine, along with $2.2 million in back taxes to the U.S. Internal Revenue Service.

National Day of Unplugging Is This Weekend

Hey, you! Put that smartphone down! Back away from that iPad! Switch off your laptop, and stop Tweeting! It's almost time for the Second Annual National Day of Unplugging. After all, even geeks need to disconnect now and then.

Based on the concept of the Jewish Sabbath (i.e. a day of rest), the National Day of Unplugging is put on by a group called Sabbath Manifesto. It runs from sundown on March 4 to sundown on March 5, and is exactly what the name implies - it's a day of rest from all gadgets and electroinics.

Sabbath Manifesto has a list of its Ten Principles to follow during the National Day of Unplugging. The basic gist: It's a chance for you to avoid technology, get some fresh air, and get back in touch with friends and

family.

If you're so inclined, check out Sabbath Manifesto's cell phone sleeping bag (a pouch to store your smartphone for the weekend) and cellular service-blocking phone-kerchief (a handkerchief that can actually block cellular signals.

As much as we love it when you read GeekTech every day of the week (bonus points if you refresh the page compulsively!), we won't hold it against you if you decide to avoid the blog this weekend. It's OK; we understand, and we'll still be here when you come back on the grid. Promise.

For more, visit the Sabbath Manifesto site, or follow them on Twitter @SabbathManifest.

Flash-Based Solid-State Drives Nearly Impossible To Erase

Researchers from the University of California at San Diego delivered a paper at the FAST-11 Conference in San Jose, Calif., last week that shows it's almost impossible to reliably erase data from a solid state drive.

The tome, "Reliably Erasing Data from Flash-Based Solid State Drives", goes through all of the known techniques for erasing data and comes up short in every case. The study's method is straightforward: They put repeating data on an SSD or USB drive, tried using various erasing techniques, took the SSD or USB drive apart, and pulled raw data off the chips. If any of the original data remained, erasing didn't work.

The culprit? SSD's so-called Flash Translation Layer, a firmware interface that makes an SSD appear to the PC like a big fat, uh, FAT device. Operating systems want to work with file allocation tables and clusters. SSDs have to deal with the vagaries of Flash media, which are quite different from rotating magnetic layers. For example, SSD blocks have to be erased before they can be written, and erasing takes a lot of time. FTL figures out how to erase unused blocks of memory when the SSD isn't doing anything else. SSD devices wear out faster if the same blocks are written and rewritten, so FTL balances the write load across all of the available memory.

You might imagine with all of these delayed erases running around and blocks of data being intentionally scattered to remote corners, there's some potential for error. Ends up, there's more than just a potential.

Here's what they found.

Erasing an entire SSD hard drive is difficult
When the researchers used the drive's built in "Erase Unit" command -- that's a legacy ATA-era command and it doesn't work on USB drives -- of the twelve SSDs tested, only four were completely erased. (One of the drives is automatically encrypted, so they couldn't tell if it was erased properly or not.) One of the drives reported it had been erased when, in fact, all of its data was immediately accessible. #FAIL.

Overwriting the whole disk fared a little bit better. With a hard drive, overwriting routines typically write all zeroes or all ones or some random character - and then repeats the process a specific number of

times. Out of eight drives tested using a similar method, one was completely erased after a single pass and two were completely erased after overwriting the data twice. One of the drives had 1 percent of the original data still on it after 20 writes. But half of the drives took more than 58 hours to perform/a single pass. The researchers gave up.

Then the researchers tried degaussing, but it didn't work at all.

Encrypting drives passed muster, because deleting the key from the Key Storage Area makes the data useless. But the authors are less than enthusiastic about the approach because there's no way to verify that the manufacturer's key deleting mechanism completely obfuscates the contents of the Key Storage Area.

Erasing a single file is a horse of a different color
Single-file eradication generally relies on overwriting all of the storage space used by the file. As you might imagine, with the FTL running interference, it's going to be very hard to pick up all the pieces of a file.

When the researchers tried the usual approach - 35 different variations on the file-overwriting theme, including several military spec algorithms - they found single-file erasure just didn't work: "All single-file overwrite sanitization protocols failed: between 4 percent and 75 percent of the files' contents remained on the SATA SSDs. USB drives performed no better: between 0.57 percent and 84.9 percent of the data remained."

Bottom line: There's no way to reliably erase an entire SSD or a single file on an SSD or USB drive, although using an encrypted drive comes close. Some specific SSDs have full-drive erasing routines that work, but there's no way for you to know which ones.

The authors of the study conclude by presenting a new set of extensions to a baseline FTL that will make SSDs erasable.

Perhaps some day we'll see the recommendations applied to an SSD device. In the meantime, the only sure way to erase the data on an SSD or USB drive requires a very large hammer.

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